

# Ash dieback project launches International Year of Plant Health

Three thousand trees have been planted in Hampshire as part of a pioneering project to tackle the devastating tree disease, Ash Dieback.

The UK's first Ash Archive has been established using £1.9 million of government funding and is the culmination of projects spanning 5 years to identify ash with a high tolerance to the disease.

The archive is a major step towards maintaining and restoring ash in the British landscape. It is intended that it will provide the basis for a breeding programme of tolerant ash over time and will enable the development of orchards producing commercially available seed.

Today (17 January 2020), the government's Chief Plant Health Officer will visit the project to plant one of the last trees in the archive. The ceremony marked the beginning of [the International Year of Plant Health](#) – a global initiative to raise awareness on the importance of healthy plants and trees to protecting nature, the environment and boosting economic development.

Ash dieback is a highly destructive disease which was first identified in the UK in 2012. The fungus penetrates the leaves of ash trees, before growing inside the tree eventually blocking its water transport systems and causing it to die. Spores of the fungus travel in the wind, meaning the disease spreads easily and making it difficult to limit its impact. However, projects to identify trees which are tolerant to the disease mean that the population could recover over time.

Nicola Spence, Defra Chief Plant Health Officer, said:

I'm delighted to acknowledge the successes of the Ash Archive project and welcome the International Year of Plant Health by planting an ash dieback-tolerant tree.

This is a damaging disease to our native ash trees as well as our timber industry. That's why since 2012, the Government has invested more than £6m into ash dieback research and £4.5m to strengthen border security. As it stands, we currently have some of the most stringent import controls in Europe.

Alongside these measures it is vital that we continue to work on securing our ash trees for the future, so I'm thrilled to see the progress that has been made with the Ash Archive and look forward to the advances we can make with breeding these trees further.

Lord Gardiner, Biosecurity Minister, said:

The International Year of Plant Health is a timely reminder of the importance of our natural environment and the action that is required, from Government and beyond, to protect our island's rich heritage of trees and plants from dangerous diseases such as ash dieback.

That is why we are committed to funding innovation in this field. We look forward to continuing our work with Future Trees Trust and Forest Research to develop a genetic collection of trees that will contribute to keeping the iconic ash tree prevalent in our landscapes.

As part of [the Government Ash Research Strategy](#), Defra funded two projects which studied ash trees as they grew to identify those exhibiting a high degree of tolerance to ash dieback. These were then grafted on to ash rootstocks and grown in nurseries before being planted to form the archive. Working in collaboration with [Future Trees Trust](#), [Forest Research](#), [Forestry England](#), [Kew](#) Gardens and [Fera](#) the trees will now be used for further scientific research into the disease.

The next steps for the project are to monitor tolerance levels of the trees under real-world conditions and continue to refine the archive by removing any trees that are damaged by the disease and replacing them with newly-identified tolerant trees from the wider countryside and other trials.

Future Trees Trust Head of Research, Jo Clark, said:

It's exciting to finally see these trees planted. They have been selected from across Britain and we will continue to monitor them over the next five years to ensure we have the most tolerant individuals with which to commence a new breeding programme for ash, thereby retaining ash as a tree for timber purposes as well as biodiversity.